

Public Perception of Comparative Environmental Impacts and Economic Preferences for Inland and Coastal Waterways and other Modes of Transportation

By Les Sutton, Kirby Corporation

You know there's an easy answer to these questions. And by the way, this topic was assigned to someone else. I'm pinch hitting, and we'll get to that later.

But I want to talk for a few minutes about the public's perception of comparative environmental impacts and economic preferences for inland and coastal waterways and other modes of transportation.

The fact is that there is almost no public perception of the comparative environmental impacts and economic preferences for waterway transportation. And you heard at least three of the panelists allude to that already. But there is almost no public perception of the environmental impacts. And that's why it's been so difficult for us to get our message across.

Why is there almost no public perception of the comparative impacts of waterway transportation? Look at where people live. Now, when this country was being founded, the waterways were the highways. They settled on the waterways. The book Lanterns on the Levee explains that during church if a steamboat whistled in Greenville, Mississippi, the men would get up and leave church to go down to the waterfront.

Where people live now, they rarely see the rivers. They are very unaware of water transportation. At the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway Association, we have a presentation called The Silent Giant. The waterways are silent because people rarely see them. That is because of where they work. How many people see waterway transportation to and from work? They certainly all see the trucks. They see the highways. And most of them see the railways, but they don't see waterways.

Another reason there is little public perception of waterways is what people worry about. How often does the average individual think about and worry about the relative costs or environmental impacts of water transportation?

So why don't people think about comparative environmental impacts and economic preferences for inland and coastal waterways and other modes of transportation? It just gets blotted out by everything else that's happening around us.

When we started the Waterways Work Campaign about a year ago, we recognized that it was very difficult to get our message across, and so we hired Fleishman-Hillard to do a couple of studies to try to show us how we needed to deliver our message; what message would resonate with the public.

And one of those reports is a focus group, and then we had some interviews. They found it wasn't a top-of-the-mind subject to the typical voter. When asked to

describe the inland waterway transportation system, the typical voter didn't mention transportation. And when you reminded them, they didn't think it needed any maintenance. Comments were: it's established, it's cheap, industries like it.

Again, there was very little public perception of navigation. When we reminded them of it, they agreed it was important, and what resonated with them was the history. And you've heard that when the nation was being founded waterways were key transportation arteries. Lewis and Clark and Huck Finn were important. History was important. Fewer trucks on the roads was important. Again, what affects them? Less pollution and less noise was important.

And surprisingly, we heard a lot in the first panel about intermodalism. It was important to them that inland waterways were an important part of the overall transportation system.

Another factor that makes it difficult for us to get our story across is adults only learn when they need to. It's very difficult to take a group of adults and give them a whole lot of information and have them absorb it if it doesn't affect them; if they don't see how it's going to affect them. They process information only when it's needed, and they want entertainment. They've worked hard all day; they're tired. The rule of the local news is if it bleeds, it leads. So entertainment, blood, sex, violence, scandal are the things that capture people's imagination.

The O.J. Simpson story had all of that. No story has captivated the American audience like O.J. Simpson because it had every one of those factors. Obviously, war is important because it has the blood and the violence, but also people think the war is or can be very important to them.

Now, our opponents understand how people learn. If you watch the attacks on the Corps and inland waterway transportation, they are always tied to events. It's very difficult for them to get an anti-waterway message out, just as it's difficult for us to get it out.

You remember the whistle blower who claimed the Corps had fudged the numbers in the Upper Mississippi study. When the whistle blower came out and talked about the bad thing the Corps was doing, they put on a full-court press. The whistle blower story was carried in about twenty papers nationwide from Washington, D.C. to Alaska. That didn't happen by accident. They were taking advantage of something that the people thought was important, i.e. the government is doing bad things.

The firing of Mike Parker was another. Again, it didn't last very long, but the environmentalists came right out with their anti-Corps message. I love a quotation by Scott Forbes of Environmental Defense. He said, "the firing of Mike Parker was the best thing to happen to the environment since God separated the heaven from the earth." Well, I don't know where he gets his theology. I don't think God separated the heaven from the earth. If he did, how could that be good for the environment?

American Rivers tries to create an image by annually releasing their ten most endangered rivers. And, of course, there is the Lewis and Clark celebration. Again, American Rivers wants to restore the Missouri River to something Lewis and Clark would recognize. The author that wrote the book about Lewis and Clark has given a million dollars from the proceeds of that book to restore the Missouri to something Lewis and Clark would recognize. I've always wanted to ask him if he wants to print his book on a printing press Guttenburg would recognize.

We do have a great story. Barges are efficient, barges are environmentally friendly, and barges relieve highway congestion. You've heard that. It's a simple story.

And maintaining a healthy viable inland waterway system is important. But the public doesn't perceive that. They just don't think about it. They have too many other things crowding it out. And that's a message we need to get across. So, we have to look at who is interested in the story: editorial boards sometimes, opinion leaders, inside the beltway, people in Congress and the administration who have to deal with the appropriations. They have to deal with authorization. So, you can get to them and their staff.

And by the way, on that Fleishman-Hillard research, we also included Congressional staffs. And they understood a little bit more about the waterways, if they dealt with it, but not a lot more.

So, we have to go to people that are important. When the story is effectively told, it's understood and accepted.

Last year after Craig Philip, one of the founders of Waterway Works, testified to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Representative Jim Duncan, the Chairman for the Water Resources Subcommittee said this, "given that water transportation is an efficient, effective, and environmentally responsible means of moving freight, we would be wise to make full use of our Maritime Transportation System". Now, friends, that's all we have to do is convince the public or the decision makers of that statement.

Barges do relieve highway congestion. A large tow on the Lower Mississippi carries the freight of 22,300 trucks. To move all domestic commerce in the U.S. by truck would require 41 million more truck trips, 9.9 billion gallons of additional fuel, and put 7.8 billion more pounds of pollutants in the air each year.

The good news is our opponent's story is not really resonating with the public either. I mean, we tend to think the grass is always greener. But I'm here today because Chris Brescia is meeting with an environmental group that has been opposing the expansion on the Upper Mississippi. They admitted two years ago that their real opposition wasn't anti-waterway. It was anti-farm. They didn't want more farming. They didn't want more run-off into the waters.

And in Tennessee, for years the environmentalists have opposed load-out facilities for logs. They're not opposed to load-out facilities for logs. They don't want the timber cut.

The Endangered Species Act has been used again and again against waterway development. They're not interested in protecting endangered species. They want to stop commercial use of the waterways.

So, the environmentalists on the Upper Mississippi are now trying a cooperative approach, and that's why Chris Brescia is meeting with them today. And I need to give credit to General Arnold who apparently explained it to them a couple of weeks ago.

Remember, adults learn only when they need to. Water transportation is not very important to them. We need to reach them with what is important, and that's highway congestion and clean air. And we need to influence the decision makers. Thank you very much.

